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This isn't a job for Congress . . . . . or for the CIA

Thanks to the leak-happy atmosphere in Washington, the CIA's "covert action" plan for sending guerrillas against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua is now very much an overt action. According to the copious and generally believable press leaks, the CIA is training a force of Latin Americans to operate along the Nicaraguan-Honduran border, presumably to interdict the flow of arms to guerrillas in El Salvador and attack government installations in Nicaragua. There are reports that a supplementary force is being trained in Argentina.

Publicizing the plan renders it highly doubtful, of course. The Hondurans are less likely to permit the operation if they must publicly acknowledge its existence, and there will be spirited opposition within the United States. Secret operations don't work unless they remain secret.

There are good reasons to want to choke off the flow of arms from Cuba through Nicaragua to the rebels in El Salvador. As long as the flow continues, the Duarte government is going to fight back and the United States will have to face the choice of supplying it with arms or allowing the rebels to succeed. And as long as the flow of arms to the rebels is controlled by dedicated Marxists, they will see to it that the distribution of the arms—and therefore the control of the rebel movement—remains in the hands of dedicated Marxists. Should the rebellion succeed, the poor, apolitical peasants who have deservedly aroused the sympathy of many Americans would have no more voice in government than the workers do in Poland. And Cuba would have an obedient satellite on the Central American mainland.

But there are also a number of reasons to wonder whether a CIA operation would work even if it had remained secret. As a practical matter, no "guerrilla" force can be effective without adequate support among the people of the target country. There is no indication that Nicaraguan disenchantment with the Sandinista regime is so deep and widespread that the people would cooperate with units whose connection with the CIA would be glaringly obvious even without press leaks. And, too, there is reason to doubt the motives and reliability of the sorts of international freebooters—Cuban exiles, former Somoza guardsmen and unstable thrill-seekers—who would join such a force. Some of them might be more likely to run a cocaine-smuggling operation than interdict arms.

As a political matter, the operation reflects this administration's preoccupation with military solutions to the exclusion of all else. Certainly, U.S. military power is a useful tool in a variety of places and situations, else there would be no point in having it. But it is only one tool, and it is best used in conjunction with other forms of U.S. power that are just as great and just as effective. It is least effective when used in desperation, as a sort of confession that the administration is bankrupt of other ideas.

more telling than any number of ships and guns. This great dynamo of wealth and industry drives the economies of the Americas. It is the natural trading partner of every country in the hemisphere, the logical source of technology, of advanced education and even of food.

But in the case of Nicaragua that immense power is being used only in the negative sense. After the United States played a pivotal role in ridding Nicaragua of its tyrannical and intensely unpopular Somoza regime, the country was cast adrift economically by a blinkered Congress. Acting out of fear that the Marxist elements of the revolutionary leadership would take control, Congress withheld aid during the critical early months when Nicaragua's political future was being decided. The prophecy thus became self-fulfilling: The Marxists gained control because they, and only they, could obtain arms and aid from the only other major sources, Cuba and the Soviet Union.

The result is that today Nicaragua is becoming a Soviet-Cuban satrapy not because of the meager advantages offered by such an association but because there is no other visible choice.

The United States can more than match the Soviets and Cubans in the ability to influence the policies of countries in this hemisphere through nonmilitary means. Most of the countries of Latin America are generally sympathetic with U.S. interests because they generally coincide with their own. During the Nicaraguan revolution a group of able and subtle U.S. diplomats, working with friendly Latin American countries, played a major role in bringing the civil war to an end and creating the conditions under which the institutions of open democracy and economic freedom can take root. But that initial advantage was soon squandered as diplomatic subtlety was replaced by the irrationality of a red scare.

The deterioration has progressed so far that even optimists are inclined to write off Central America as a lost cause. Yet it is not lost. Two of the largest and most influential countries of the region, Mexico and Venezuela, are ready and willing to work with the U.S. in settling disputes and limiting Soviet-inspired subversion in their own back yards. The Marxist leadership in Nicaragua has not yet gained so strong a hold over the country that other political elements are powerless to challenge it.

Maybe the vast economic and diplomatic power of the United States can still be marshaled so as to regain the initiative from the Soviets in Nicaragua and keep them out of El Salvador, and maybe it is already too late. But if the only alternative is to send in the CIA to do an almost impossible job with whatever motley crew of malcontents it might have to depend on, the choice is clear. If it's too late for economic and diplomatic weapons to do the job, then it's impossible to see how the CIA could do any better in a part of the world long resentful of intervention by the United